

Land of the Free

Dear Mamá,

The land of the free, they called it, *the place where dreams come true and money grows on trees*. The stories they used to tell me, Abuelita, and the others who dreamed of memories they never experienced—people with the perseverance and indomitable spirit to trudge over bleak hills and across lonely valleys. “Heroes,” she’d call them. “You can never cross the ocean until you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.”

Has it really been years since you tested that word, hero, like Eve did knowledge?

Have you ever seen someone praying like there was no tomorrow?

Letting it all out? Begging for forgiveness as if no one was watching?

You prayed every night as it was all you knew, because your life was signed away with a pen whose might transcended a hundred men, because all you could do was sit in the dark, a single mother, hands together, hoping.

Because the slab was cold against your cheek and your eyes were red like cayenne peppers. Were they blank and unseeing, or had I really disappeared into the burning grasp of captivity?

You stared out at the Los Algodones crossing. It, too, had grand stories, as the crossing was the last obstacle before refuge, and months of crowded bus rides and blisters would suddenly be justified for dreams.

Venga aca. His Spanish was distant, ICE written on his vest. *Where is my daughter?* you whispered like Eve to the snake. *Come*, the man hissed.

Have you ever understood the *land of dreams*? Where *money grows on trees*?

Where documents are signed in languages you can't understand. Were your eyes closed as you signed that first paper, desperately trying to forget about the green bills in his hand?

You dared to believe: *he's going to take me to paradise.*

But God had forsaken you. Your wrists bore metal mouths caving in on them, biting like icicle teeth. Your eyelids shook and your heartbeat pounded all the way to your head. Your body crashed into the car's trunk and your eyes kept shut.

It was your lungs that cried first and you shook, and tears forced your eyes to open, and in your grasp was nothing.

Not a dollar.

Not your husband.

Not me—

your sole reason left to live.

But you looked down and you looked up. They were both the same but one direction had God, and you in the dark could do nothing.

The men came and light flooded into the trunk. Your eyes had dried.

“Out!” But you did not budge and the side of your face took a blow.

The land of the free, they called it, where I met indignity.

Because every night soft hands like snakes slithered under your undergarments and not even tears would help you.

Forgive my sins, you pleaded once more, and protect my child.

For my body, my mind, and my life.

That's why you prayed.